

Since gaining independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a 30-year war, Eritrea has struggled to implement political and economic reforms. Beset by internal political problems and violent confrontations with neighbors Ethiopia and Sudan, the ruling Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) has become increasingly repressive, cracking down on political opponents and members of religious groups it perceives as undermining national unity. Since the PFDJ cancelled the 2001 elections, it has moved to jail political dissidents, curtail free speech and free assembly, and impose severe restrictions on religious freedom.

The Eritrean government officially recognizes the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran-affiliated Evangelical Church of Eritrea, as well as Islam. The government has close ties to the Orthodox Church and is suspicious of religious groups without a long history in the country—in particular, the Protestant evangelical and Pentecostal denominations, among others. Eritrea's 1,600 Jehovah's Witnesses were the first religious group to experience repression. Negative official and popular views about the Witnesses developed as a result of their refusal to take part in the 1993 independence referendum or to serve the obligatory tours of military service. Although members of the Jehovah's Witnesses are currently allowed to meet publicly and in private homes, members still experience official harassment ranging from prolonged detention for refusing military service to the revocation of trading licenses and dismissal from the civil service. Some Witnesses who refused to serve in the military have been in jail for 10 years.

Recently, Protestant evangelical and Pentecostal churches, or “Pentes” as they are collectively known in Eritrea, have begun to experience difficulties. The Orthodox Church first called attention to the growth of what it considers “heretical” newer denominations, and the loss, particularly of its younger members, to these denominations. Tensions between Orthodox and Pente churches started in provincial areas and eventually moved to the capital, Asmara. In 2001, Orthodox Church leaders sanctioned an attack on Pente prayer groups in which many people were beaten, their property vandalized, and Bibles and other religious material burned. In the interest of “maintaining national cohesion,” the PFDJ banned religious organizations from involvement in politics and from commenting in detail on political matters. Fear of the destabilizing effect of proselytism by either Muslims or Evangelicals also caused the government to impose serious restrictions on international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have all but ended their activities in Eritrea.

In late 2002, the Eritrean government issued a decree requiring registration for all religious groups, with the exception of the four government-sanctioned groups: the Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Muslims, and members of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. By stipulating that without registration, no religious activities, including worship services, could be held, the decree

effectively shut down all other religious communities in Eritrea, including other Christian groups, Baha'is, and others. To date, no other religious groups have gained government registration, even though some groups submitted applications over one year ago, with the result that all except the four government-sanctioned religious groups operate without a legal basis.

Government authorities have also informed Pente groups that they would not allow gatherings of more than five persons in private homes. Government spokespersons began comparing "Pentes" to Islamists, branding them a danger to national security. According to some religious groups and aid workers, it is now almost impossible for Pente Christians to meet without fear of arrest or harassment.

Religious repression is said to be particularly severe in the armed forces. During the war with Ethiopia, many Eritrean soldiers embraced various forms of Protestantism, reportedly alarming government officials and leading to the banning of prayer meetings among armed forces members. Attendance at such meetings is punishable by imprisonment. Moreover, anyone found in possession of a Bible faces severe punishment, and there are unconfirmed reports that two soldiers were shot for reading the Bible. According to several human rights organizations, 54 people were detained in August 2003 and locked in metal container boxes after authorities found Bibles in their possession at a military training camp. The PFDJ denied the International Committee of the Red Cross access to these makeshift prisons.

The most recent estimate of religious prisoners runs as high as 300. Aid workers report that the number might be higher, since an unknown number of soldiers and military conscripts are being held incommunicado. In the past year, Pente Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of Orthodox splinter groups have been jailed, beaten, and threatened with death by security forces. Those arrested are often asked to sign a commitment to deny their faith in order to be released. Parents and family members have been refused access to the prisoners unless they agree to persuade them to sign the "confession."

According to U.S. State Department sources, the Eritrean government has, until very recently, refused to discuss religious freedom, considering it a matter of "national security." U.S. officials who have proposed traveling to the country have been told they could not discuss religious freedom concerns with Eritrean government officials.